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ABSTRACT

Advice for American families who host a foreign student is offered, with attention to culture shock, the first visit, stages of the student's adjustment, and mealtimes. It is suggested that both the host and foreign student can learn from the other. At first, the host family should speak slowly and clearly and be careful to avoid talking loud, since increased volume does not guarantee clarity. Learning about the student's background and providing information about the features of the U.S. locale are important. Stages of adjustment for the foreign student may include arrival fascination, culture shock, adjustment/isolation, adjustment/acceptance, and return anxiety. A relaxed, unhurried meal around the family table can promote getting acquainted. Family customs should be maintained, and the student should be served after a family member to provide an opportunity for the newcomer to observe how much to take from an array of strange items. In some countries, alcoholic beverages are unacceptable, and in many, milk is uncommon. A frank discussion of differing perceptions of friendship may be helpful for both students and families. The foreign student advisor should be contacted when the student encounters difficulties in the following areas: employment restrictions, immigration and visa problems, and academic problems. (SW)

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Friendship with an International Student

A guide for new American host families

National Associaiton for Foreign Student Affairs

Alexander the Great Was the First Known Foreign Student

The value of extended college and university education to those who work to solve the problems of our world is reflected in the increasing number of men and women who come to the U.S. to study each year. Approximately 250,000 students from more than 160 countries are enrolled in our academic institutions in any given year.

A student's first priority is to his studies: this requires spending considerable time to acquire facility in English, which is possibly his second or third language. The U.S. educational system with its frequent examinations is in all likelihood very different from that of the student's home country and may be more difficult.

Many students, however, desire to learn as much as possible through personal experience of the politics, economics, geography, culture, and people of a different country. The hospitality of Americans can provide a multidimensional view of American life, can temper loneliness for the newcomer, and can help overcome the isolation of the campus. It seems demonstrable that experiences outside the classroom and beyond the dormitory can be an illuminating and unforgettable part of a student's stay here.

The host family CONCEPT offers the possibility of a mutually rewarding relationship between the American family and a foreign student, giving each the opportunity to learn from the other. Traditionally, American families have been active in these programs; today many single adults also are serving as host families. Whatever your situation, we invite you to participate in this rewarding program.

Culture Shock: No Monopoly for Anyone

Many students arrive in the U.S. exhausted. The stress of preparing forms and applications, awaiting permissions, making financial plans, and leaving home and family behind for an indefinite period, has probably meant several months of concentrated effort. Add to that a long international flight, jet lag, and the strain of speaking and listening in English, ever fearful of misunderstanding, and it can be understood that students frequently need several days to rest, observe, and listen.

Many international students in the U.S. are sophisticated young adults from countries with unique cultures, very likely hundreds of years older than that of the U.S. They have much to share, but that requires patient, careful listeners while the students become familiar with everyday English. Remember to speak slowly and clearly when addressing the students. While their comprehension is still limited, be careful to avoid raising your voice in conversation. Increased volume does not guarantee clarity. A smile and a nodding head merely may be a polite way to indicate that the student hears you speaking, and it does not mean that real communication is taking place.

The First Visit—I'm Glad to Meet You

No matter what your family structure, you have made the decision to host a student from another country. This experience will hopefully be rewarding for you and the student. If this is your first opportunity to meet a foreign student, a few suggestions may be helpful.

If it is possible, write a welcoming letter to the student before he leaves home or to the dorm if he has already arrived. Describe your family, your home, and something about your activities and interests. Your written invitation to the student should include the precise time and place of meeting, transportation, and how long the visit will last. This will help prevent misunderstandings and can be referred to in case of doubt or uncertainty.

Your interest in the student may be reflected by learning what he is studying and some facts about his native country. Weekly newsmagazines, TV documentaries, the encyclopedia, and visits with persons who recently traveled in that area are helpful. It may be valuable to know:

- Location and size of the country
- Form of government
- Capital and chief cities and sizes
- Ethnic characteristics
- Religious groups—holidays observed

Although it would be impossible to be familiar with all the cultural differences between the student's country and the

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U.S., greater understanding may be achieved by awareness that major differences do exist.

In discussing your own country, check the World Almanac for help. The things you want to know about the student's country are exactly what he wants to know about the U.S. The student may be interested in what you can tell him about our form of government, local historical areas, or outstanding features of your community.

For the first contact, many host families invite student guests for a meal, evening or afternoon of conversation. More often than not, host families provide transportation for this first visit. If you are unable to do this, provide clear and complete instructions on how to find you and what means of public transportation are available. *Don't be surprised if your guest is late!* Unlike many cultures, we live and are regimented by the clock. In some countries, an invitation implies arrival an hour or more after the set time; in other countries, an invitation is extended several times before it is accepted. To prevent misunderstandings, be sure the student has your telephone number and you his so that a quick check can be made.

In many cultures, guests are offered refreshments as a matter of courtesy when they first arrive. It may be your custom to serve beer or cocktails. You will want to provide an alternative drink for the student if his religion, culture, or preference precludes the use of alcohol.

After you have met the student, practice pronouncing his name correctly; ask what name you should use when addressing him.

It is fun to learn the words of greeting in the student's language; it can warm the friendship quickly.

After the initial greetings and introductions, the student may enjoy a tour of your home. Explain briefly any interesting features, and answer questions thoughtfully. Students are often amazed at the amount of space occupied by one family, the gadgets to accomplish the work, and the number of cars in the garage. A mutual exchange about lifestyles may be of interest to both you and the student, since students also come from a variety of economic backgrounds.

Students are sometimes lonely and may enjoy talking about their families. Include your children in conversations; students usually enjoy children very much, substituting them for their own brothers and sisters. They also may find it much easier to converse with children than with adults.

At Meal Time

A relaxed, unhurried meal around the family table is a time-honored way of getting acquainted with each other. These are a few hints to make the time together pleasant for both.

-Save the formal dinner with candles, crystal, and china for another visit. Make this one informal and less strained for the hostess as well.

-Maintain your family customs. If it is your practice to start the meal with a prayer, song, silence, or simply to begin serving each other, do so after you have explained to your guest.

-Serve the student after the first family member so that he can observe what and how much to take from the bewildering array of strange items. Small servings are best until the student can decide what he likes. Before trying an item of food the student may ask you to explain what it is. Table manners vary from country to country and the student may follow his own cultural customs when eating.

-Offer second helpings more than once. In many countries it is polite to decline a second helping the first or even the second and third times.

-Conversation while eating is the custom in all cultures. A quiet guest may be practicing his own cultural patterns and may be embarrassed if bombarded with questions to promote conversation rather than being allowed time to eat.

-In addition to alcoholic beverages being unacceptable to many guests, milk is not a common beverage in most countries. Fruit juice, soft drinks, tea or water are often welcome offerings.

-Rich desserts for which many Americans have a special fondness are often unknown in other countries. Your guest may prefer a piece of fresh fruit (which he will probably peel) or a cup of tea at the end of the meal.

Since food restrictions exist in many cultures and religions, you should ask your guest if there are foods and beverages you should not serve. Hopefully, you will be aware

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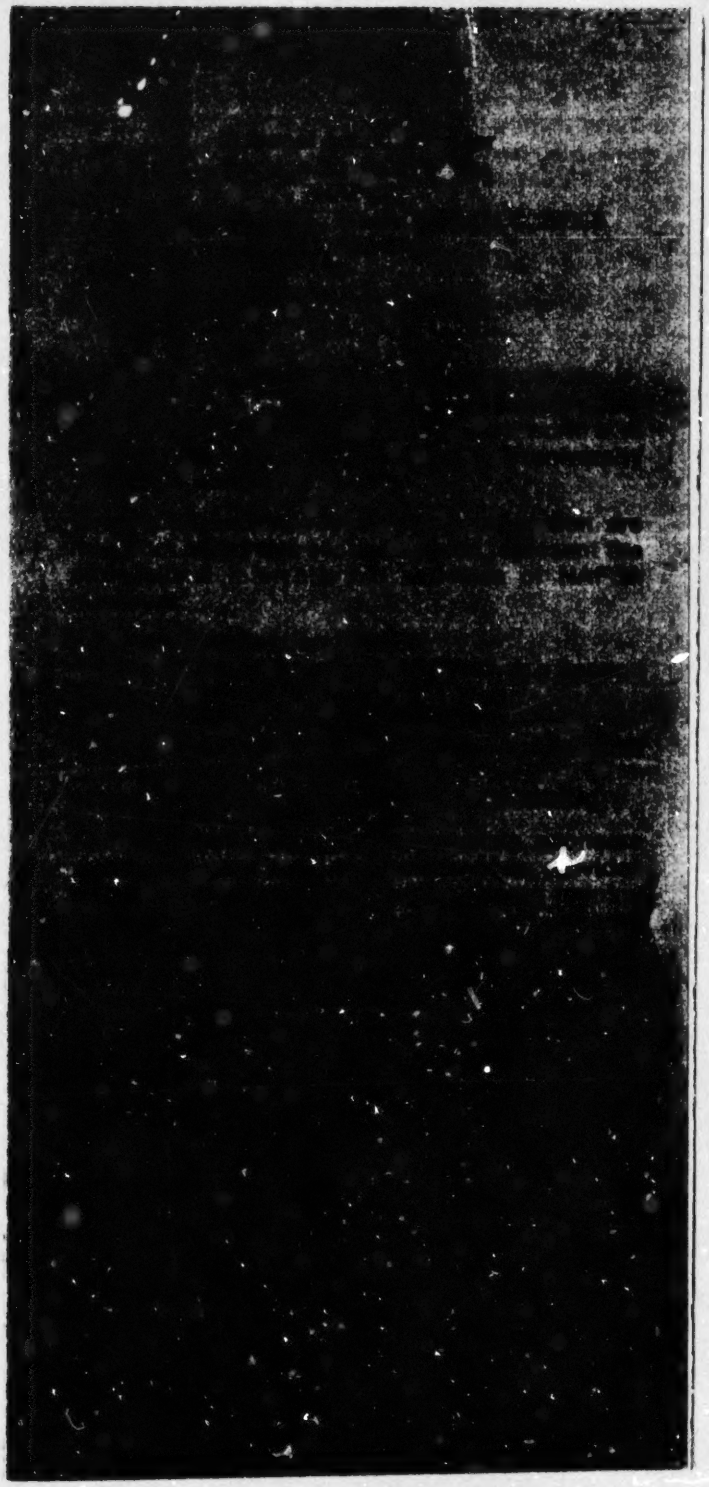

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of these restrictions before you meet the student. Some students, because of religion, culture, or preference, are vegetarians; others eat no pork, beef, or fish. These restrictions cause no problem as long as the host is aware of them in advance of the meal.

Do Come Again . . . (and mean it!)

Students have often commented that Americans are generally very friendly on the first meeting but tend to neglect the student after the initial contact. Many students feel a great loss of friendship when they leave their homes. In some cultures, friendship is a deep and consuming relationship which is reserved for a very few people since it is based on mutual love and respect with unlimited obligation. Americans, however, understand friendship as doing things with other people whose company they enjoy. A frank discussion of differing perceptions of friendship may be helpful for both students and families.

The first visit will probably provide areas of interest that can be explored in future visits. A friendly note, a phone call, birthday card, invitations to share holiday time together, or a sport or cultural event in which the student has expressed interest may bring you together. Again, a written invitation sent well in advance, followed by a phone call, will help assure an understanding of the event. Be sure to indicate dress, beginning and ending time, whether the event includes a meal. Students may hesitate to accept invitations during busy school periods, so do not feel affronted if the student must decline in favor of a test or term paper.

While neither Americans nor foreign students are necessarily authorities on their own countries, events and happenings in their respective countries are of mutual interest and concern and often become the focus of discussions. Differences and similarities are sometimes topics of discussion. For example, the numerous religious denominations found in the U.S. are a puzzling phenomenon for many students. Some host families invite their student guests to accompany them to church; the students certainly should feel free to refuse.

How Are Things Going . . . This Month?

When students arrive in the U.S. they are beginning a new life far from home and the schools of their youth. Host families often meet students at the airport and assist them over the first few days of settling in and getting adjusted. However, adjustment is not accomplished in a few days; on the contrary, it takes a year or more in some cases. An explanation of some of the various stages of adjustment may be helpful. Not every student will experience these stages, but host families who have been puzzled by student attitudes may find the listing helpful.

Arrival fascination. The student who has recovered from his initial exhaustion is soon very busy with registration, interviews, orientation to the campus, tours, parties, and getting acquainted with his host family. He is caught up in the excitement of the experience and is beginning to find his place on campus and in the community.

Culture shock. Following immediately on the heels of the initial excitement is the frustration with college bureaucracy and the weariness of speaking and listening to English every day. Sleep patterns may be disrupted: the student may suffer indigestion and be unable to eat; he may refuse to talk and protest at not being able to understand anyone. The student may sleep all day and watch TV instead of studying. Study habits may fail entirely.

Adjustment/isolation. This phase occurs after a few days (or a few weeks) of culture shock when the student can understand lectures and textbooks somewhat better and has passed one or two quizzes. He makes a few friends and learns to manage the size and complexity of the campus. The student may then isolate himself and devote full time to studies, ignoring areas of life that are difficult. Sometimes problems with English language tend to isolate the student further and he may cling to one friend who speaks the same native language. At either the culture shock or adjustment/isolation stage, the student may become very critical of all things American and the host family may find it difficult to communicate with him.

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Adjustment/acceptance. This is realized when the student finally feels at ease with the college and with peer groups and can handle the language well. Then he will be anxious to learn more about U.S. society and the significance of daily events, and he will want to travel around the country. He will be better able to handle with understanding any differences with friends; relations with the host family can deepen and mature.

Return anxiety. As the student nears completion of his studies and return home draws closer, anxieties begin to intrude. It is difficult to leave new friends, a safe and familiar environment, and comfortable patterns of living. The student may realize how much he has changed since leaving home and wonder if it is possible to fit in again. This feeling may be compounded if the student is aware of changes in his own country and culture which have occurred during his stay here. The student might like the opportunity to discuss the implications of these changes and his own needs with the host family.

The host family can be of help to the student experiencing any of these feelings by just being friendly listeners.

Knowing Where to Stop . . . Referring Responsibilities

There are areas of the student's life which the host family is not equipped to handle but for which the foreign student advisor on campus must have responsibility. Difficulties in the following areas are always referred to the foreign student advisor:

1. Employment restrictions
2. Immigration and visa problems
3. Academic problems with professors, advisors, or administrators

Although financial aid is not expected, host families may be helpful in locating medical services or assistance with family or marital problems if the institution does not provide these services to families of foreign students. Problems concerning major financial or medical strains, however, should be referred to the foreign student advisor.

Benefits

Involving your family as hosts to a foreign student can be a very rich experience. The rewards range from enriching your life and expanding your viewpoints to coming to love and respect the student as an additional member of your family circle or simply as a friend. Often the relationship continues to grow after the student returns to his home country, and sometimes it is only at this point that both the American family and the student realize the impact of the relationship on their lives.

Readings On The Subject

Additional materials for community volunteers who program activities for international students are available from the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, 1860-19th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

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